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STANFIELD HALL.

BY J. F. SMITH,

Author of "Minnigrey," "Woman and Her Master," &c.



Illustrated by Sir JOHN GILBERT, R.A.
AND OTHER EMINENT ARTISTS.

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VOL. II.



[DEATH OF THE LEECH.]

STANFIELD HALL.

he sought, and the chill of disappointment fell upon his heart as he reined his steed in the court-yard of the Duke of Norfolk's stately palace, without having met with one familiar face amongst the crowd, or heard a single voice to bid him welcome. As soon as his eminence and the two dukes had entered the house, he threw the reins of his horse to one of the numerous grooms, and rushed into the street to make his way to Steadman's, where he felt assured of obtaining some tidings of his mistress. He found the old man disconsolately seated in the chamber at the end of his warehouse, his pale, anxious face reclined upon his hand, and his eyes red with weeping. Walter was much shocked, deeming at first that it was illness which had changed him. His sister Maud was tranquilly seated by the diamond latticed window, which looked upon the river, reading her missal. The excitement of the previous day had passed away, and the maniac was comparatively calm.

As the spurs upon the heels of the young man rang upon the stone floor, the honest wool-comber raised his eyes and recognised him. Their meeting, though cordial, was a sad one. Nothing could equal the astonishment and indignation of Walter Lucas on hearing the death of Henry de Corbey, and the accusation which it had brought upon the Lady Mary. The old man's tale of the mendicant friar who had set him on to watch, and his inexplicable disappearance, alarmed and confused him. The future appeared like a mist, through which appalling shadows alone were faintly visible.

"Oh ! 'tis a deep-laid scheme," he cried, "to lime the fluttering bird ; the snare has cunningly been laid, but shall as cunningly be broken, and despite his rank and ill-acquired wealth, Sir John de Corbey shall find——"

"Anathema ! anathema !" shrieked the hitherto tranquil Maud, bursting into her usual strain of mingled fury and insanity on hearing the name of the man whom she believed to be the assassin of her son. "His blood shall become a curse, and his race extinct —his hearth a desert as lonely as my heart. I had a dream, a dream——"

"Be calm, Maud," said her brother, kindly. "Remember that Heaven works all things to its purposes."

"I know, I know," resumed the heart-broken mother, "that I must be patient ; he told me so. Cuthbert, my boy, appeared to me last night, his bonnet falling o'er his auburn locks, his blue eyes bright with strange intelligence ; but then his cheek was pale—oh ! so pale, it pained my heart to gaze on it. Shall I tell you what he whispered me ?—that I should be revenged—ha ! ha ! revenged at last !—and so I must be patient. Yes, yes," she added, merrily, as if replying to her own distempered thoughts, "it will be cleared up soon."

"It will indeed," said Walter; "forgotten deeds are hourly brought to light; no book so sealed but time unfolds the page, and keen-eyed justice reads the damning record of our crimes at last."

"What mean you?" demanded Steadman, struck by the solemnity of his words and manner.

"Nothing," replied the young man; for the strict command of Wolsey to keep silence respecting the discovery of the unfortunate armourer's bones fettered his tongue, "or at least nothing more than to inculcate faith and patience." Fearing to be questioned further upon the subject, their visitor hastily took his leave, promising to return the following day. The first spot to which he directed his steps was the castle, where he vainly prayed for an interview with the prisoner; for the governor was in the interests of her accuser, whose newly acquired wealth gave him the means of paying largely for the services of all who sell their souls for gain.. Disappointed in his intention, with a heavy heart he turned from the ancient keep, and retraced his way to the palace of the Duke of Norfolk, where our readers may remember the cardinal was lodged. His purpose was, if possible, to obtain an audience of Wolsey, the last anchor on which he could rely in this sudden shipwreck of his hopes.

It was not till after the evening banquet that our hero found the opportunity he sought.

Disengaged of his robes of state, and wrapped in a gown lined with rich sables, the prelate was seated in his private chamber, reading a variety of papers; some treated of the pending divorce between Henry and Katherine—others were letters from the French king, who, taking advantage of the coolness between the Courts of England and Spain, sought to renew the alliance against the Emperor Charles V., who warmly espoused the cause of his unfortunate kinswoman, and used his influence with the Pope to defeat the perhaps legitimate demand of the English monarch: we say legitimate, because in Henry's justification it must not be forgotten that the principal universities and legists of Europe had all but unanimously given their opinions in his favour.

It was a tangled web he had to unravel; in it were mingled the passions of the king, the insincerity of the pontiff, and the inflexible obstinacy of the queen, who defended the validity of her marriage with a firmness which her husband's supplications and the arguments of his councillors had equally failed to shake. To Henry's honour it must be remembered that, till the final sentence which Cranmer eventually pronounced, the unhappy Katherine was treated by him with all honour. Wolsey was too clear-sighted not to perceive the rocks and quicksands by which he was surrounded, and even his firm spirit trembled at the danger. It

was, therefore, with something like pleasure that he beheld the tapestried entrance to his chamber drawn aside, and Walter present himself. The presence of the youth was a relief to his weary, overtaxed mind. The great man almost smiled as the youth bent the knee before him.

"We have heard it all!" he exclaimed; "Henry de Corbey's death, and the knight's accusation. I fear me our retreat at Bury has had an evil influence on the poor maid's fortunes."

"It has indeed!" sighed Walter, who felt that, if his master had but arrived those three days sooner, all would have been well.

"But not irreparable," said the cardinal. "That is," he added, gravely, "if she be innocent."

"If she be innocent!" repeated her lover. "My life that she is innocent! Mary—the good, the gentle Mary—guilty of murder! Should an angel's tongue, my lord, proclaim her guilty, I never could believe it."

"You vouch it boldly," observed Wolsey.

"Because I know her heart—her soul—her mind: and all are sinless as a young seraph's thought. I have watched their opening dawn—weighed in love's balance each rising impulse, action, word—and found, like angel's smiles, each purer than the last."

"Such," said the churchman, "is the blind confidence of youth, which believeth all things where it loves. The heart's bitter task from the cradle to the grave is but to forget its trust in man's integrity and woman's faith. As we advance," he continued, "in life's dull road, mask after mask is rent aside, till we behold the idol of our dreams stripped of the grace imagination lent it. In all humanity's sad, stern reality, we wake from dreaming only with our footsteps in the grave."

"If this be true, my lord," answered his hearer, "let me descend there with unbroken dreams. Better to live the world's blind fool, than its far-seeing cynic. I could not bear to feel within my heart no other tenant than dark mistrust, or thrust forth friendship and confiding love, to make the seat of life a charnel-house."

"A cold, bitter smile passed over the features of his eminence as he listened to the impassioned words of the speaker. Perhaps he remembered the time when he believed like him; perhaps he doubted his sincerity, and demanded of himself if the young man was not acting a part to win his confidence. He resolved to try him further.

"Think you," he demanded, "that Sir John de Corbey could have been accessory to his son's death?"

"Heaven forbid that I should wrong mine enemy," said Walter; "not willingly, my lord. He loved the boy too well; he was his hope, his life's ambition—a being of generous impulse and high thought—a heart so pure, a spirit so ingenuous, they made men

wonder at capricious nature that such a son should spring from such a father."

Wolsey's brow relaxed, for he *knew* that the youth had measured justice both to his rival and his enemy.

"There is some mystery," continued his visitor, "which time or chance may give the key to. O my dread lord," he added, "one word, one little word, from you will save her. We have a witness, a wandering friar, who, concealed within the chamber, witnessed young Henry's death."

"A wandering friar!" repeated his hearer.

"Put off the trial till that man be found," continued Walter; "upon my knees I ask it,—for life, fame, love, all hang upon his breath. Can you hesitate, my lord, when you already have such fearful proof of what her enemies are capable?"

"I cannot stay the course of Justice," said Wolsey. "There are respects where even power must pause."

"But you can guide her steps, my lord," interrupted the pleader. "Remember, she is blindfold, and her sword, without your arm to stay it, may strike the innocent and spare the guilty."

"What I dare do, I will," resumed his master; "orders shall be given to find the man you speak of. Have you," he demanded, fixing his eyes keenly upon him, "revealed to any one the mystery of the armourer's death?"

"No," replied Walter; "and yet the secret burns upon my tongue. I long to brand the villain to the public scorn, strip him of the cloak hypocrisy has cast around him, and the world the foul deformity it hides. But I have been silent."

"Be silent still," said the churchman. "Why I demand this you are not the judge; how I shall use it you have yet to learn. Of what order," he added, carelessly, "was this friar you spoke of?"

"Of the Mendicants?"

"Good; and now retire; in the morning my chancellor will give you an order to admit you to the Lady Mary; hear her version of this fearful story: it may perchance present a clue to guide us through the labyrinth. Go," continued his grace, "and remember Heaven is not the less prepared to strike, because its arm is veiled in clouds. Go, and if the maid be really innocent, go in confidence and hope."

"I could almost trust that boy," he murmured to himself, after Walter had withdrawn; "the world hath not spoiled him yet—ambition's fire not quite corrupted his young heart. As he spoke, how the memories of my youth returned! Methought I listened to his dead father's voice—to the companion of my boyhood's years—to him whose merry laugh mocked the aspiring hopes of greatness, which childish confidence oft pictured forth in friendship's trusting hour. They are realised," he added, proudly; "dreams have

become realities ; but am I happier ? I must not ask myself that question, lest I should find the hill I mounted with such toilsome steps is ashes—ashes—ashes ! ”

With an effort the speaker dismissed from his mind the train of thought into which he had fallen, and resumed the perusal of his papers. In a few moments he was again the statesman.

Early on the following morning, as Walter left the palace, he was accosted by Patch, who for once had doffed his motley suit of office, and was attired in a dress of black more befitting a reverend divine than a jester.

“ Whither goest thou ? ” he demanded, as our hero passed the gate ; “ thou hast a face as long as the chamberlain’s wand, and as woe-begone as a rejected suitor’s.”

“ It reflects my heart,” replied the young man ; “ for my errand is a sad one.”

“ Take folly with thee, then,” said Patch ; “ it is the salt which seasons life—the antidote to melancholy and the spleen. They are your fools who rail at mirth and cannot see a sermon in a jest.”

“ Not now,” exclaimed the impatient lover ; “ I am too sad for jesting.”

“ I will be dull then, too,” continued the intruder ; “ why, man, it is my nature. I am like Janus, double-faced—a moral death’s head with a painted mask—folly on one side, wisdom on the other. There,” he added, screwing his features into an expression of solemnity, to which his laughing, mischief-loving eye gave the silent lie—“ a mourning heir at a miser’s funeral could not better act his part. What, not one smile ! Then thou art sad indeed.”

“ I go,” said Walter, “ to visit innocence in a dungeon.”

“ Ah ! then I must go with thee,” resumed the persevering jester ; “ in such a case a fool will be, in the world’s opinion, thy fit companion ; for sober wisdom, boy, will scout thee for it. Visit innocence in a palace,” he continued, “ an’ thou wilt. Nay, even in a cottage, without great imprudence, it may be sometimes risked—upon the sly ; but in a prison ! Pshaw ! had I not been too long at court to blush, my cheek would crimson for thee.”

“ Thou hast a kind heart,” exclaimed the young man, who perfectly understood the speaker’s bitter humour.

“ Have I ? ” said Patch. “ Keep the discovery a secret, then, I pray you.”

“ Why so ? ”

“ The world would only find it out to wound it. Hearts are like flying fish—the shark and albatross both prey upon them.”

“ Have with thee,” said the young man, with a melancholy smile ; “ since thou art resolved on such dull company, take it not amiss if I entreat thy presence no further than——”

“ Fear not, I have a character to lose,” interrupted his companion,

resuming at once his former sarcastic tone, "and know the world too well to let it catch me in an act so foolish as visiting the unfortunate—a crime were nothing to it.—I shall intrude no further than the gate."

Walter was struck with the natural delicacy of the speaker, and the tact with which he understood his wishes. On their way to the castle he related to him the story of his love—its trials, hopes, and fears : painted with a lover's eloquence the grace and virtue of the Lady Mary, and the knight's heartless cold oppression. On hearing the relation of the murder of Henry de Corbey, and the sudden disappearance of the mendicant friar, the jester became deeply interested, and weighed his words attentively.

"You still believe her innocent?" he demanded.

"I could swear it," replied our hero.

"So could I."

"You!"

"I!" repeated Patch; "look not so surprised, for folly hath a logic of its own, which, after all, is nearer allied to wisdom than men think. As thus: sober reason slowly proceeds from the premise unto the consequence, while folly jumps it—a process far more expeditious," he added, with a cheerful smile, "and quite as satisfactory."

"Wolsey hath promised to seek out this man," continued Walter, "upon whose evidence so much depends."

"He'll keep his word," drily observed the jester, "be it for good or ill."

By this time they had reached the castle, which, for many years, had been converted into a county and city prison. This time the governor, who seemed disconcerted at their arrival, was all civility and smiles ; the sight of the cardinal's seal to the order of admission had wrought a wondrous change in him.

How shall we describe the interview of the long-separated lovers—its tears and confidences, its hopes and fears? The prisoner, who since the death of her cousin had listened to no friendly voice, had met no sympathising look, sobbed on the breast of the scarcely less agitated Walter, as with broken words and sighs she related all the terrors of that fearful night—his father's cruelty—Henry's devoted death, and the mysterious conduct of the mendicant friar, in whose integrity, despite his unaccountable disappearance, she placed firm faith, declaring her firm conviction that his absence was owing to the machinations of her enemies, and not to any participation in their crimes. Her suitor, in his turn, described his reception by Wolsey, and the interest which the still powerful minister expressed in her sad fate. Bitterly did he lament the delay occasioned by the retreat at St. Edmund's shrine, a delay which had given the ruthless knight time to spread the net in which his victim was so fearfully entangled.

Whilst the youthful pair are thus occupied in sweet intercourse of mutual consolation, let us return to the jester, who remained in the court-yard of the castle, gravely occupied in examining the curious architecture of the ancient pile, in the contemplation of which he seemed absorbed, but whose restless, prying eyes, in reality, noticed every trifling incident that occurred.

Nearly an hour had thus passed, when the door of the turret, which led to the governor's apartment, opened, and the functionary, whose confusion on their arrival Patch had noticed, appeared, accompanied by a tall, thin, grey-haired man, whose aquiline nose, piercing black eyes, and sharp intellectual features, denoted an Italian rather than Saxon origin. There was a degree of affectation in the indifference with which they crossed the court, and the careless adieu of the functionary to his companion at the gate, which the shrewd observer failed not to note. The likeness to the physician of Sir John de Corbey, a personage whom Walter, during their walk, had minutely described, instantly struck him. The fool was not far wrong in his guess.

"You seem interested, sir, in these old walls," said the governor, with a cringing civility; "many a curious deed has passed within them."

"Doubtless," said Patch, drily.

"Many have died here by the axe and cord," continued the man, not altogether pleased with the tone of the reply.

"Any by poisoning?" demanded the jester, fixing his eyes upon the speaker.

"Poi—poisoning?" repeated the fellow, the blood, despite his habitude of self-control, rushing into his cheek; "not—that—I know of; how should I?"

"Ah! I thought you might."

There was a pause; the governor mentally cursing his folly for having provoked a conversation upon a subject which circumstances rendered dangerous and unpleasant. He felt that it was necessary to say something, for each moment's silence added to his embarrassment.

"You belong to his good grace of York?" he at last faltered out.

"No."

"No!"

"His good grace of York belongs to me," said the jester, with a gravity which might have deceived keener wits than the dull gaoler's. "I have dined and supped upon him for these twelve years past."

"I understand you," replied the fellow, with a broad grin. "Doubtless he is a profitable master; you turn the penny by him."

The jester relaxed the gravity of his expression, and screwed up his features with so knowing a look, that the gaoler's grin gradually expanded itself into a hearty laugh, in which his visitor joined.

From a protuberance about the chest of the rascal's doublet, he judged that a bag of coin, or a parcel of some kind, had been hastily thrust there, and he determined in his own peculiar way to ascertain the fact. Continuing, therefore, to laugh and twist his face into every possible variety of expression, he gradually approached the governor, and in the paroxysm of their mirth gave him a friendly poke, such as one man might familiarly offer to another in good fellowship, upon the chest, just where the appearance excited his suspicion. A faint chink followed the blow. The gaoler's laugh instantly ceased, and he eyed him suspiciously.

"Par Dieu!" said Patch, wiping his eyes, which overflowed, "but you keep your keys in a curious pocket."

"I can't be too careful," replied the man.

"Of course not," answered his companion, gravely, fully convinced in his own mind that the sound proceeded from coin of some kind.

"Would you like to see the dungeons?" demanded the governor; "some of them are curious in their architecture. I can show you places," he added, "which common eyes have seldom gazed upon."

The proposal was assented to, and calling for a torch, the governor preceded his guest down a low arched passage, leading to the subterranean dungeons which had existed from the Saxon times, and where Canute had doubtless kept his prisoners. They were excavated in the mound on which the keep stood.

In less than an hour Patch returned whistling, alone; and on the following morning a new governor, who had been appointed by Wolsey, took possession of his office in the castle.

It was a dangerous thing to play at cross purposes with the jester.

The morning at last arrived on which the anxiously-expected trial was to take place, and the county hall was crowded with the rank and beauty of the neighbourhood. The youth of the prisoner, the historic name she bore, and the many dark rumours which attached themselves to the fame of her guardian, had contributed to excite interest and curiosity to the highest pitch. At one end of the court the three judges were seated; the presiding one was the father of the celebrated Sir Thomas More, who succeeded Wolsey as chancellor of England. At a table beneath their elevated seat were the advocates and prosecutors in the cause. The Lady Mary, attended only by her lover and the faithful Steadman, was, in consideration of her station, accommodated with a chair, and spared the humiliation of the felon's dock. Her features were pale but dignified. The friar, upon whose evidence so much depended, despite the exertions and promise of the cardinal, had not been found; and her only hope was that her judges might be induced to postpone the trial in order to give further time to find him.

It was remarked that, during the proceedings, Sir John de Corbey never once raised his eyes towards his injured kinswoman ; whilst Adam, on the contrary, was frequently seen to regard her with an expression of pity and interest.

As soon as the jury had been sworn, the advocate for the prosecution rose to address the court. He began by painting the virtues of the deceased—his noble character and ancient lineage—and the love which it was well known he bore to the accused ; “a love,” he added, “which has severed the last branch of a noble tree—a love which, instead of awakening sympathy, engendered hate—a love whose bridal couch hath been the grave. This honourable court,” continued the speaker, “can well imagine that Sir John de Corbey received with pleasure the prospect of a union which promised to cement the happiness of his son and the honour of his family. Unfortunately, the wishes, the passions of the prisoner were opposed to such arrangements ; her affections, I regret to say, have been artfully seduced by one whom her guardian, from a mistaken charity, had reared in his own household, warmed the half-frozen viper till it stung him, and who does not hesitate to appear in this solemn presence—affronting justice by his hardiness, insulting the childless parent, of whose bereavement he has indirectly been the cause.”

Walter bit his lips till the blood started to hear himself so characterised, but for the prisoner’s sake was silent.

The advocate, after concluding his vituperative charge, was about to call his witnesses, when the counsel for the Lady Mary arose, and demanded a postponement of the trial, on the ground of the absence of a necessary witness—a mendicant friar, who, concealed within the chamber, witnessed the whole transaction, and whose evidence, he contended, would not only prove the innocence of the presumed culprit, but turn the accusation most fearfully on her accusers.

The judges whispered together, and, after some minutes’ consultation, demanded of the speaker if he had any corroborative proofs to offer of the existence of such a person and friar.

Steadman was sworn before the court.

“I object to that man’s evidence !” exclaimed the opposing advocate ; “I can call witnesses before this honourable court to prove that for years he has been known to entertain a deadly rancour towards Sir John de Corbey ; that he has frequently threatened him with vengeance—predicted dishonour, ruin to his house—nay, often boasted that he would bring him to a scaffold yet.”

Witnesses were called, who, unfortunately, were but too well able to prove the intemperate threats of the bluff old soldier. It was decided by the judges that his evidence should not be taken, and, as no other person had seen the friar, the objection was overruled, and the trial ordered to proceed.

"Lost!" sighed the unhappy girl, as she sank with her head upon her lover's shoulder; "my last hope gone!"

Steadman, half-mad with passion and indignation, rushed from the court, where perjury and corruption for a time carried everything before them. Flying anywhere to avoid the crowd, the broken-hearted man directed his steps towards the church of the Dominicans, in which Wolsey held his legatine court, where, however, he seldom presided in person, leaving that office to his chancellor and two doctors of divinity retained for that especial purpose. As the wool-comber crossed the cloister he beheld to his astonishment the stately figure of the mendicant hurrying before him; for a moment he could scarcely believe his senses, but deemed it was some vision; once convinced of the reality, however, he sprang upon the friar, and seizing him by his robe, exclaimed:

"Friar or devil, I've found you, then, at last."

"What means the slave?" demanded the astonished man.

"Slave! I am an Englishman—no slave," replied Steadman; "more, I am a constable, and I seize on you as a witness in the cause of the heiress of Stanfield, accused of murder. Will you go with me?"

"No."

"Then," said his captor, most inconveniently tightening his grasp, "I'll make you."

"I'm a priest," exclaimed the friar.

"If you were a bishop you should go," coolly answered Steadman, "though I did penance for a month for laying hands upon your rochet. So come," he added, dragging the friar, with a grasp of iron, towards the gate. "You may as well come quietly; for, by our bluff king Harry's oath, dead or alive, you follow me."

"Madman!" exclaimed the prisoner; "loose your hold. What ho! Guard! treason! treason!"

In an instant the officers and soldiers who were in attendance on the vice-legates rushed from the church, for the voice was not unknown to them. The struggling men were surrounded and separated.

"An attack upon the cardinal!" exclaimed one of the officers, who recognised the friar's face—"cut the villain to pieces."

A slight wave of the hand restrained them.

"The cardinal!" repeated Steadman, sinking on his knee.

For a few moments Wolsey regarded the old man with a flushed brow and angry eye, which gradually, however, gave place to a kindlier look, when he remembered how he had been mystified.

"Knowest thou the penalty incurred," he demanded, "for laying hands upon a prelate?"

"No," replied the prisoner, bluntly; "but I dare say, death. You are great and powerful—I poor and honest. I care not for myself, but for one I love like my own child. They drove me

from the court," he added, "because, forsooth, my tongue had been sometimes faster than my wits—refused my evidence, as if I could bring my soul to lie even against my enemy! Mary says one word from you will save her. Ah! I see a gracious smile upon your lip, which tells or imports she is——"

"Innocent!" interrupted Wolsey, kindly. "Away to the court-house! I shall be there as soon as you—to do a deed that shall strike earth's guilty great ones with dismay. Captain," added the speaker, "I do discharge you of your prisoner. Summon my escort and my household; we will but doff this guise, and then set forth at once."

Steadman was no sooner released than he flew with the rapidity of a far younger man towards the court-house, from which he had so lately rushed. How different were his feelings on his return! He felt that he was the bearer of hope, life, love; his heart was full of its intelligence, and every instant seemed an age till he discharged the burden. During his absence, the work of perjury and crime had advanced towards its completion; despite the prisoner's simple tale, the defence of her advocate, and the indignant, impassioned appeal of Walter, the jury had pronounced her guilty, and the presiding judge was about to pronounce sentence.

"Death!" exclaimed the old man, bursting into the court, and repeating that word of the judge; "who talks of death, when I bring life and honour? He's found—the witness found!"

Adam laid his hand upon Sir John's arm, who had involuntarily started from his seat at the intelligence.

"A mere subterfuge, my lord," said the advocate, rising; "they have no witness."

"No witness!" repeated Steadman; "you lie. No witness! Ha! ha! ha!—he will soon be here."

At this moment the clash of arms without announced the arrival of the cardinal.

"No witness!" he continued, with an hysterical laugh. "Behold!"

The great entrance to the court was thrown open, and Wolsey, in his robes of state, attended by his officers, entered the court. All rose to receive him. Walter's heart beat wildly—he remembered his master's promise.

"Be seated, my good lords," exclaimed his eminence to the judges; "we are here to perform an act of justice."

The heiress of Stanfield sank upon her knees in gratitude; she knew that she was saved; she recognised in the deep-toned voice of the speaker the witness she had sought—that the mendicant friar and Wolsey were the same.

CHAPTER VII.

But truth shall yet be heard—no human power
Can stifle or corrupt her purposes.
Through superstition's gloom her voice is heard—
It pierces through the veil of barbarous ages,
And injured Virtue walks triumphant forth,
Freed from the taint of calumny and crime.

—CREON.

WITH a precision, every word of which sounded in the ears of the astounded Sir John de Corbey and his accomplice like a death-knell, Wolsey related all that had passed in the chamber of the prisoner on the evening of her cousin's death. Many a bright eye was gemmed with tears as their fair owners listened to the story of a boy's devotion and a father's crime. The persecutions to which the orphan heiress had been subjected were detailed at length, and the heartless villainy of her false guardian made clear as day. Not content, it seems, with the accusation to which she had so nearly fallen a sacrifice, the knight had, through the ministry of his agent, Adam, attempted to poison his victim even in the last fearful sanctuary of the laws—her prison. The late governor of the castle—whom Patch, the jester, had cleverly made a prisoner, at the very moment when that functionary, under the pretence of showing him the dungeons, had intended him the same kind office—was produced in court, and acknowledged that he had received a certain sum of money to mix a powder, which the Italian had provided him with, in the Lady Mary's food. From the promptitude with which he had been secured, both the poison and the bribe were found upon him. The wretch confessed to everything, for he knew into whose iron grasp he had fallen, and that his only hope of mercy was in truth. A yell of execration, which even the majesty of justice failed to repress, rose from the auditory, as one by one the crimes of the prosecutor were laid bare. Warm, sympathising friends thronged round the agitated and still weeping prisoner, eager to atone by present kindness the injustice of their past suspicion. But the interest and excitement of the scene were still further increased when, on a signal from the cardinal, four officers appeared in court bearing a black chest, which they deposited on the table before the judges, who commanded it to be opened. Expectation was raised to its utmost pitch as the usher of the court raised the lid and disclosed a human skeleton; the girdle of iron and the collar round the neck, together with staples which had riveted them to the wall, still remaining on the mouldering bones. At the same instant several of the halberdiers secured the persons of the knight and Adam. The brow of Sir John became suddenly flushed, and he was observed to stagger at the sight. Even the usually pale face of the leech became paler as he gazed on the fearful evidence of a crime which he deemed long since buried in oblivion.

On perceiving that his eminence was about to speak, there was a breathless silence in the court. Men felt that a strange revelation was taking place—one of those extraordinary developments in which unerring Providence vindicates the justice of its ways to man—hunts guilt from out the cunning labyrinth where it hides, demolishes its subtle guard, its covered trenches, its well planned citadel, and from the fragments of its vain defences constructs the proofs which send it to the scaffold.

"Knowest thou," he demanded, fixing his cold glance upon the murderer, "knowest thou these bones?"

Shame and desperation gave to the guilty man a courage to which the terror of his glance and quivering lip gave the silent lie. With an effort worthy of a better cause he firmly answered in the negative.

"Nor these fetters?" continued his interrogator, pointing to the manacles remaining on the skeleton.

"No."

"This may perhaps refresh your memory, sir knight," said Wolsey, at the same time throwing upon the table the scabbard which Walter had found in the recess. It bears a name should wake an echo in thy conscience, unless, like them, it is of iron—Cuthbert, the armourer's."

"My dream, my dream comes true at last!" shrieked the maniac mother of the victim, who, with the cunning peculiar to insanity, remembering her former forcible expulsion from the church, had remained a quiet spectator of the trial. "Heaven hath heard the widow's prayer, and will avenge her wrongs!"

There is a majesty in sorrow which even the vulgar must respect. The people made way for the wretched Maud, who advanced from the crowd of spectators into the body of the court. Approaching the table where the ghastly remains of her son were placed, she raised the crumbling skeleton in her arms, and imprinted a maternal kiss upon the fleshless brow. The skull of the murdered youth reclined upon her bosom, upon the pillow where in smiling infancy it so oft had lain, and whence its innocent lips had drawn the first pure stream of life. It was an appalling picture to behold the living and the dead locked in that close embrace. Even the judges, accustomed from their painful office to scenes of misery, were moved to pity, and all but the assassins wept.

"Curse him!" she exclaimed, in a voice broken by convulsive sobs, and raising at the same time her withered hand to heaven; "curse him, thou righteous Judge! Bare Thy red arm in justice forth, and launch the eternal bolt within his heart! Dry the springs of penitence within him, that no absolving tears gush forth to cleanse it of its foulness! Strike him with unbelief! harden him to his perdition! Living, let fiends possess his impious soul,

and mocking devils gibber at his prayers! Withhold the boon of madness from him! Sleep fly his burning eyelids as from a couch accursed! Let him loathe life, yet shrink with childhood's terror at death's coming shadow! Despair and infamy go with him to his dungeon, and mock him on the scaffold! I am heard!" she added, with a laugh whose frantic mirth made the stoutest present shoulder. "John de Corbey, the widow and the mother's curse is writ against thee in the Book of God—ha! ha! ha! My boy and I will sit in heaven together and laugh at thy eternal agony; laugh as thy black soul writhes in its lake of fire!"

"Peace, woman!" said the presiding judge, after a silence which lasted several minutes, and which even he almost feared to break, so intense was the horror and excitement created by her passionate imprecations. "Even the guilty have feelings to be respected; the majesty of justice must not be outraged by a scene like this. Remove her from the court," he added, turning to the ushers who were standing behind the sheriff; "but do it with all gentleness."

Two of the officers approached to obey the order; but Maud, clasping the remains of her son still closer to her heart as for protection, fixed on them a look so wild that even they hesitated to approach her.

"Withered be the hand that touches me!" she cried; "accursed of God and man! Would you separate the mother from her child—from her long-hidden treasure? I'll be calm," she added; "silent as the voice which made life's only music to my widowed heart; but I must remain: I shall go mad else—mad with man's injustice—mad with my griefs and wrongs. There—the dead and I will wait in silence and in patience—wait for earth's justice on our woes together."

With as much tenderness as a young mother could have shown her first-born child, the maniac placed her frightful burden upon the ground, and seated herself beside it. Removing the long black wimple from her head, she covered the remains with it as with a funeral pall. The action permitted her long white hair to fall dishevelled, like a silver veil, upon her shoulders. Judges and spectators alike were deeply moved; the former motioned to the officers to permit her to remain. Indeed it would have been difficult, in all that vast assembly, to have found a heart sufficiently hard, or an arm strong enough, to remove her.

As the verdict against the heiress of Stanfield had not been recorded, no further process was necessary than that the jury, on the recommendation of the judges, should reconsider their judgment, which for form's sake they did, and unanimously and instantly pronounced her Not Guilty. The joy of the assembly would have been far more boisterously expressed, had not the strange emotions they had been subjected to damped their ardour.

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